



## Following ICC Request, Largest Regulated Electric and Gas Utilities Offer Consumer Protections to Prevent Disconnections

Chicago, IL - At the request of the ICC and consumer advocate groups, Illinois' largest investor-owned electric and gas companies have agreed to make available more flexible, and generous deferred payment arrangements for low-income customers unable to pay utility bills fully or on time due to COVID 19 and inflation.

Partners in this effort include the Office of the Illinois Attorney General on behalf of the People of the State of Illinois, the City of Chicago, Community Organizing and Family Issues, represented by the National Consumer Law Center, the Citizens Utility Board, Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Family Services, and Allen Cherry.

“The ICC understands the tremendous economic challenges low-income energy consumers are facing and has been working with the utilities and advocates to lessen the burden,” said ICC Chairman Carrie Zalewski. “We want customers to know that financial assistance is still available for those who qualify through LIHEAP but stress the urgency in applying because time is running out for 2022. Anyone struggling to pay their bills need to call their utility to discuss payment options.”

Illinois' annual winter statutes, rules, and voluntary utility winter moratoria used to protect eligible residents who use electric or gas to heat their homes from disconnection expire on April 1. Millions of dollars in energy assistance are still available through the expanded Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Percentage of Income Payment Plan (PIPP) programs. Applications for PIPP enrollment are being accepted until March 31, 2022. Applications for enrollment for LIHEAP are being accepted until May 31<sup>st</sup>. Customers are strongly encouraged to call the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) LIHEAP hotline at 1-877-411-WARM (9276) or visit the DCEO website [Energy Assistance - Assistance for Individuals \(illinois.gov\)](https://www.dceo.gov/energy-assistance) for more information about qualifications and how to apply for LIHEAP and PIPP. General information about energy assistance programs can be found at [Home Weatherization - Home Weatherization \(illinois.gov\)](https://www.dceo.gov/home-weatherization).

Concerned customers hit hard by the pandemic and high energy prices could lose vital utility services, ICC Executive Director Michael Merchant sent a letter to executives at ComEd, Ameren Illinois, Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas, and Nicor Gas requesting more be done to protect these customers. “It is vital that these customers be able to seek available assistance such as LIHEAP without fear of disconnection while their eligibility for assistance is being reviewed,” said Merchant.

His letter went onto ask the utilities to examine billing and collection systems and practices to make certain consumer service representatives are aware that customers have sought financial assistance. The ICC and advocates also requested the utilities to stagger disconnection notices to alleviate pressure on aid agencies who might otherwise be overwhelmed by an influx of demand for assistance, and to make

available more flexible deferred payment arrangements to help customers pay any outstanding obligations over time.

Each of the utilities submitted to the ICC letters outlining their individual commitments to help consumers avoid disconnection.

#### ComEd Commitments:

- In order to allow customers' electricity to remain connected until they are able to take full advantage of current and anticipated LIHEAP and PIPP program support, ComEd pledged to protect low-income customers eligible for Illinois' Utility Disconnection Avoidance Program (UDAP) from disconnection for nonpayment through July 31, 2022. ComEd will also make available to currently designated low-income customers deferred payment arrangements (DPAs) of 12 months with \$0 down through July 31, 2022.
- For customers who have applied for LIHEAP or PIPP but have not yet been approved and subsequently identified as a low-income customer, ComEd will similarly offer to enroll a customer in a 12 month, \$0 down DPA if the customer contacts ComEd and informs a ComEd Customer Service Representative that he/she/they has submitted a LIHEAP application online or through a Local Administering Agency.
- ComEd will offer all other residential customers, who contact the utility, the ability to sign up for a DPA for up to 12 months with 10% down until July 31, 2022.
- For customers that are disconnected, but subsequently enroll in LIHEAP or PIPP, ComEd will waive reconnection fees through July 31, 2022.
- ComEd has also committed to send out disconnection notices to residential customers in a staggered manner and to stagger disconnections based upon a customer's arrearage level compared to the average residential customer arrearage on January 31 (i.e., \$231). For the April 2022 billing period, customers with arrearages of 250% or more of the January average arrearage (i.e., customers with arrearages of \$575 or more) will be eligible for disconnection. For the May 2022 billing period, customers with arrearages of 175% or more of the January average arrearage (i.e., customers with arrearages of \$400 or more) will be eligible for disconnection. Starting with the June 2022 billing period ComEd will resume its standard business operations disconnection practices.
- ComEd has pledged to inform customers and engage in targeted community outreach efforts to raise awareness about its offerings.

#### Ameren Illinois Commitments:

- With the goal of connecting eligible customers to available financial assistance for utility services, Ameren Illinois has agreed not to send disconnection notices to customers eligible for UDAP2 and not to disconnect such customers for non-payment through July 31, 2022.
- Extended deferred payment agreements will be offered for up to 18 months with 0% down until July 31, 2022 for LIHEAP-qualified residential customers as well as customers actively applying for LIHEAP assistance. Customers must communicate to an Ameren Illinois Customer Service Representative that they are actively applying for LIHEAP assistance.
- Ameren Illinois will offer all other residential customers the ability to sign up for a DPA for up to 12 months with 10% down until July 31, 2022. Customers may self-serve 24/7 through our website or phone, or by speaking with a CSR during normal business hours.

- Ameren Illinois will waive reconnection fees for LIHEAP/PIPP qualified customers through July 31<sup>st</sup> and waive late fees for income-eligible gas customers.
- Ameren Illinois will send disconnection notices to all customers in arrears and eligible for disconnection but will stagger residential customer disconnections for non-payment. Through the month of April, Ameren Illinois will only disconnect residential customers for non-payment who owe 150% of average arrears (\$628 or more). Starting in May 2022, Ameren Illinois will resume its standard business operations disconnection practices.
- Ameren Illinois said they will proactively communicate with customers through various channels, encouraging them to take action to apply for financial assistance programs and enroll in a DPA.

#### Nicor Gas Commitments:

- Recognizing the continued need for bill payment assistance and support, Nicor Gas, in partnership with The Salvation Army, is making an additional \$1 million available this year through the Shield of Caring program. Nicor Gas is making a total of \$2 million available to eligible customers in the first program year. Residential customers with a household gross income in the last 30 days below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level may be eligible to receive a grant of up to \$250 once every two years to apply to their past due accounts. Customers eligible to receive assistance from other programs such as LIHEAP, and still have a past due account may be able to receive a grant through the Shield of Caring program.
- Nicor Gas has also launched a Community Connection Center, a one-stop shop to help income-qualified customers connect with bill payment assistance, energy efficiency solutions, and other community resources.
- Residential customers who have received LIHEAP or PIPP benefits during 2022 will not be disconnected for nonpayment prior to July 31, 2022.
- Through July 31, 2022, Nicor Gas will offer to enroll any residential customer in an extended 18-month deferred payment arrangement (DPA) with a 0% down payment. Customers must call Nicor Gas at 888-642-6748 to enroll in the more generous DPA.
- Nicor has also agreed to phase in residential disconnections for non-payment starting on April 4, 2022 with those at highest arrearages eligible for disconnection. Only customers who do not make a payment or contact the utility to enroll in a DPA will be disconnected. For the April 2022 billing period, customers with arrearages of 150% or more of the January average arrearage (i.e., customers with arrearages of \$450 or more) will be eligible for disconnection. For the May 2022 billing period, customers with arrearages of 100% or more of the January average arrearage (i.e., customers with arrearages of \$350 or more) will be eligible for disconnection. Starting with the June 2022 billing period Nicor Gas will resume its standard business operations disconnection practices.

#### Peoples Gas/North Shore Gas Commitments:

- In order to serve the needs of customers and ratepayers during these challenging times, Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas have agreed to protect LIHEAP and PIPP customers from disconnection through July 31, 2022.

- Both utilities have agreed to offer Low-Income Customers (LIHEAP/PIPP) and customers that have applied for LIHEAP or PIPP a 0% down, 18-month DPA through July 31, 2022. To receive this benefit, customers must contact the North Shore or Peoples Gas call center. The offer will not be available through the website.
- Non-Low Income residential customers, beginning April 1, 2022, through July 31, 2022, may enroll in a 25% down, 18-month DPA.
- Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas have agreed to waive reconnection fees for eligible Low-Income customers through June 30, 2022. However, any balance due will need to be repaid prior to reconnection.
- Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas have also agreed to phase in residential disconnections for non-payment starting on April 1, 2022 with those at highest arrearages eligible for disconnection. Residential customers with high arrears amounts for North Shore (i.e., \$850 or greater) and for Peoples Gas (i.e., \$1,850 or greater) are currently being sent notices and will be subject to disconnection beginning April 1, 2022. At the end of April, North Shore and Peoples Gas will evaluate their disconnection plans to determine if the arrearage threshold for disconnection will be expanded.
- Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas pledge to continue robust customer communication plans regarding financial assistance, payment assistance, and energy efficiency options.

To read the letter from ICC Executive Director Michael Merchant to the utilities as well as the response letters from the utilities, click [here](#) on the Utility Assistance page of the ICC website.

The ICC thanks the consumer advocates for their tireless advocacy on behalf of Illinois residents who use electric and gas utility services and the utilities for making voluntary offerings to assist the states most vulnerable energy customers. The ICC additionally thanks DCEO and representatives of the LAA community for providing energy assistance program details that the utilities relied on to inform their commitments.

The ICC has a dedicated webpage to help consumers learn more about financial assistance programs available to them. For more information visit: [Utility Energy Assistance \(illinois.gov\)](https://www.illinois.gov/utility-energy-assistance). Consumers who wish to file a complaint against their utility can call the ICC to speak with an English or Spanish speaking counselor Monday – Friday, from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. at 1-800-524-0795 or by completing a form online [here](#).

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